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GULF TIMES SPORT



FOOTBALL

Suarez returns
to England with
nothing to prove

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FOOTBALL/ AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Al Sadd draw with Pakhtakor despite superb Xavi brace

AL RAYYAN SQUANDER LEAD TO GO DOWN TO AL WAHDA



Al Sadd star Xavi is congratulated by teammates after he scored against Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor in Tashkent yesterday. The match ended in a 2-2 draw.

Agencies
Tashkent

Spain and Barcelona legend Xavi rolled back the years with a superb first-half brace only for Al Sadd to twice squander their lead and settle for a 2-2 draw against Uzbek giants Pakhtakor in their AFC Champions League encounter here on Tuesday.

Fresh from their record 14th league title in Qatar, Al Sadd seemingly had the match in control but defensive errors allowed the hosts to grab a vital point that helped them stay atop Group D with five points from three matches.

Al Sadd are second on four points, ahead Persepolis on goal difference, after the Iranians defeated Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli 2-0 for their first victory in Doha on Tuesday.

At the Pakhtakor Markaziy Stadium in the Uzbek capital, it was Xavi who was undoubtedly the star of the show as he silenced the partisan crowd by displaying glimpses of his class that had made him the most feared midfield maestro during his heyday.

Barely had the match settled into some sort of a pattern, when Xavi stamped his authority with a sublime strike in the sixth minute.

After receiving a fine pass from Baghdad Bounedjah, the highest scorer in last season's AFC Champions League, the Spaniard curled in the ball from the edge of the penalty to beat the Pakhtakor goalkeeper Sanjar Kuvvatov all ends up.

Much to Al Sadd's disappointment,



Rayyan's midfielder Rodrigo Tabata (L) vies for the ball with Al Wahda's defender Ahmed Rashed during their AFC Champions League Group B football match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday.

however, the advantage however lasted only three minutes as Khojikbaar Alijonov punished the visitors for a poor clearance with a powerful shot past goalkeeper Mashaal Barsham.

With both sides intent on attacking, it was only a matter of minutes before another goal materialised, and sure enough it was Xavi once again who was in the thick of the action.

The Al Sadd skipper, who has announced he will retire at the end of the sea-

son, struck spectacularly from a 25-yard free-kick in the 16th minute to restore the Qatari side's lead.

But once again they couldn't hold on to the lead as Serbian Dragan Ceran made it 2-2 for Pakhtakor in the 42nd minute with a fine header past Barsham.

Both teams failed to make good of the chances that came their way in the second half as the match eventually ended in a stalemate. They will clash in the reverse fixture in Doha in two weeks' time.

Meanwhile, an added-time goal from Leonardo sealed a 2-1 comeback win for UAE's Al Wahda against Qatar's Al Rayyan in Group B.

The two sides went into the fixture level on three points, with goal difference favouring Al Wahda.

Al Rayyan looked to pump crosses into the box for Gelmin Rivas throughout the first half with the Venezuelan striker seeing his header saved by goalkeeper Mohammed Al Shamsi at the 15-minute mark.

Rivas was again at the receiving end of a Mohammed Juma cross six minutes later, but he failed direct his header goalward.

Korean defender Rim Chang-woo responded with a headed effort for Al Wahda, but his ball sailed over the crossbar, before Rivas again missed a header from a Rodrigo Tabata cross.

A last-ditch tackle from Mohamed Alaeldin denied the UAE side a certain scoring opportunity before the half-time break. The Qatar defender snatched the ball from underneath the feet of Leonardo as the Brazilian was set to pull the plug following a quick counter attack.

The match burst into life in the second half as Rivas finally got his goal for Al Rayyan. The striker evaded his marker to get on the end of Lucca Borges' cross from the right wing and slip home the opener eight minutes after the restart.

Al Wahda restored parity in the 67th minute through Sebastian Tagliabue. Playmaker Ismail Matar supplied a superb through pass for the Argentine who latched onto the ball and applied a composed finish past goalkeeper Fahad Younis.

SPOTLIGHT

Injury-time heroics earn win for 10-man Antlers

Reuters
Hong Kong

Defending champions Kashima Antlers scored twice in injury time to secure a come-from-behind 3-2 win over South Korea's Gyeongnam FC despite finishing their Asian Champions League clash with 10 men yesterday evening.

The Japanese side trailed by two goals with 19 minutes remaining after Tomoya Inukai headed into his own goal and Jordan Mutch's side-foot volley doubled Gyeongnam's advantage.

An own goal from Korean defender Woo Ju-sung halved the deficit with 15 minutes remaining, only for Inukai to cap an eventful evening when he was sent off six minutes from time for a second bookable offence.

Antlers looked destined to slip to their first defeat since winning the title last year, but Takeshi Kanamori levelled a minute into injury time from close range and Serginho smashed his shot into the top corner two minutes later to give Go Oiwa's side all three points.

"I think we can be proud that we fought to win here with 10 men," said Oiwa.

"But we need to turn our sights to the next game, not bask in this win for long. We managed to keep our composure when we were under pressure, and that led to the goals in the end."

Kashima move on to seven points from their first three games and lead group E by two points from Shandong Luneng, with the Chinese Super League side securing a 2-1 win — their first of the campaign — against Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim.

Marouane Fellaini scored

with a close range header to claim his debut Asian Champions League goal for Shandong Luneng, and Graziano Pelle doubled the side's lead from the penalty spot seven minutes before the break.

Safawi Rasid's spectacular curling effort just before the hour mark gave JDT hope of salvaging a point, and Gonzalo Cabrera hit the cross bar late in the game as the Malaysian side narrowly missed out on a draw.

Cedric Bakambu, meanwhile, scored a hat trick for Beijing Guoan, who claimed their first win in group G with a 3-1 victory over Thailand's Buriram United that pulls Roger Schmidt's side into contention for a place in the next phase of the competition.

The Chinese side move on to four points and trail leaders Jeonbuk Motors by two points after Adriano scored the only goal of the game, as the South Korea champions saw off fellow two-time champions Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan.

In the western half of the draw, Iranian side Esteghlal hauled themselves back into the running for a place in the next phase as they beat group C leaders Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia 2-1 to secure their first win.

The Tehran-based club move on to four points from three games with Al Hilal still leading the standings with six points, while Qatar's Al Duhail sit in second after their 2-2 draw with former champions Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates.

Zob Ahan maintained their unbeaten start to group A when they defeated UAE side Al Wasl 3-1 to move on to seven points, and the Iranian side are three points clear at the summit after Al Nassr from Saudi Arabia handed second-placed Al Zawraa from Iraq a 4-1 thrashing.



Gyeongnam FC's Kim Seung-jun (L) fights for the ball against Kashima Antlers during their AFC Champions League Group E match in Changwon yesterday.



SPOTLIGHT

Qatar 2022 stadiums feature prominently at Arab football exhibition in Paris

The FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 features prominently in a new exhibition launched this week at the Institute of the Arab World in Paris.

The Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (SC), the body tasked with overseeing the infrastructure and legacy for Qatar 2022, has donated stadium models for the exhibition, which is titled 'Football and the Arab World: The Revolution of the Round Ball'.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, France's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was the guest of the honour at the exhibition, which was also attended by Prince Ali bin Ali al-Husseini, and Sheikh Ali bin Jasssem al-Thani, Qatar's ambassador to France. SC secretary-general Hassan al-Thawadi also attended the opening and signed a partnership in support of the exhibition with Jack Lang, President of the Institute of the Arab World.

Al-Thawadi said the SC was proud to showcase its plans for Qatar 2022 at the institute, which is located near Notre Dame Cathedral.



SC secretary-general Hassan al-Thawadi (left) speaks to Prince Ali bin Ali al-Husseini (second from left) of Jordan, Institute of the Arab World president Jack Lang (centre) and French Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian (right) during the 'Football and the Arab World: The Revolution of the Round Ball' exhibition in Paris.

"We're pleased to be part of this enthralling exhibition which highlights the Arab world's passion for the beautiful

game," said al-Thawadi. "Events such as this help to illustrate the power of football and how sport can bring people, countries and

regions together. We're thrilled to have the chance to show how preparations are coming along for the first World Cup in the

Arab world and proud to contribute towards this showcase of our region's football history."

The exhibition features 11 segments, including one devoted to Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup. The Qatari segment features all eight stadium models, along with two videos which highlight the recent infrastructure progress. In addition, the Qatar Football Association has donated various memorabilia following Qatar's victory in the AFC Asian Cup earlier this year.

Other highlights of the exhibition include a segment devoted to Larbi Benbarek, who was one of the first players of Arab origin to be successful in Europe. The story of France-based players who joined the Algerian independence movement is also documented, while there are specific features on football in Palestine, the women's game in Jordan and the passion for football in Cairo. There are also segments on Paris Saint-Germain and the best XI in Arab football history. (SC.qa)

FOCUS

Ronaldo raring to go against Ajax

Agencies
Rome

Cristiano Ronaldo is back from injury after being named in Juventus' squad for today's away Champions League quarter-final match against Ajax.

Ronaldo hasn't played for Serie A leaders — who are just one point away from sealing an eighth Italian league title — since scoring the sensational hat-trick that saw Juve come back from a 2-0 first-leg deficit to knock out Atletico Madrid last month.

But the Portugal captain was named in Massimiliano Allegri's 21-man Champions League squad.

Giorgio Chiellini misses out due to a left calf contracture while Emre Can also stays in Italy after straining his right ankle in the 2-1 Serie A victory over AC Milan on Saturday.

"Cristiano has been training, he is a professional and is doing all he can to help the team," his compatriot Joao Cancelo told Sky TV on Monday.

Allegri, however, has more worries in defence than up front, where Mario Mandzukic, Paulo Dybala and Federico Bernardeschi are available, Douglas Costa is back from a long lay-off and

teenager Moise Kean is in fine form netting five goals in the last five Serie A outings.

"Kean also entered and scored [the winner in Saturday's 2-1 defeat of AC Milan]," Allegri said. "He is doing very well, but let's leave him to be calm. He needed to stay at Juventus to grow technically, train and play with the champions, but he can also improve mentally."

Trouble could come from the absence of veteran centre-back Giorgio Chiellini, who reportedly left Monday's training session with a pulled calf muscle. Defensive midfielder Emre Can is nursing a sprained ankle but Sami Khedira is back and approaching top form after heart surgery.

Tight defence will be crucial against the fast and aggressive Dutch, who boosted their reputation with a 4-1 away hammering of holders Real to advance 5-3 on aggregate.

"Ajax is a really strong team," Cancelo said. "I watched the match they played in Madrid with Real. They have so many young players with so much talent and we have to be very careful."

"However, we are ready to play our best possible match and bring home the win to make it more likely to go to the semi-finals."

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Suarez returns to England with nothing to prove

Messi's talent stands alone but his partnership with Suarez is extraordinary too



Barcelona's Luis Suarez celebrates his goal during the La Liga match against Atletico Madrid at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Saturday. (AFP)

AFP
Barcelona

His goal against Atletico Madrid on Saturday should prove Barcelona's knock-out blow in La Liga and now Manchester United are tasked with containing the might of Luis Suarez in Europe.

The image of Lionel Messi's partner-in-chief has been defined by his darker side, a relentless, ferocious and, occasionally, misguided opponent, running defenders ragged for the best part of a decade.

When Barca's coach Ernesto Valverde is asked about the threat posed by Suarez, the description he often reverts to is "un dolor de cabeza". A headache.

Suarez's reputation as one of the game's arch-villains is entrenched, perhaps nowhere deeper than in England, where he was found guilty of racial abuse for calling United's Patrice Evra "negrito" in 2011 and, a season later, sank his teeth into the arm of Chelsea's Branislav Ivanovic.

Suarez was suspended for a combined 18 matches and there were two further bites, on Ottoman Bakal in 2010 and Giorgio Chiellini at the 2014 World Cup. Suarez returns to Old Trafford

today in the last 16 of the Champions League, the tournament Barcelona crave success in this season more than any other.

Two months before his clash with Chiellini, Suarez had been named the Premier League's PFA Players' Player of the Year and won the division's Golden Boot award after scoring 31 goals for Liverpool.

In four seasons at Anfield, he hit 82 goals in 133 games, a ratio better than both Thierry Henry and Robin van Persie at Arsenal, Alan Shearer at Newcastle and Didier Drogba at Chelsea.

For Barcelona, who paid Liverpool just over 80mn euros to sign Suarez in 2014, his contribution has been clouded less by indiscipline and more by Messi, the player around whom the whole team revolves.

Suarez is Messi's provider, runner and foil but has managed to perform the role without losing sight of what he can bring too.

LONG AWAY DROUGHT IN EUROPE

Karim Benzema delivered 11 and five league goals in his last two seasons in the shadow of Cristiano Ronaldo but in five years at Barca, Suarez's La Liga tally reads 27, 35, 35, 33 and 30, the last still with seven games to play.

There have been barren

spells, often in the late summer months, when fitness has been lacking, and in the Champions League, where Suarez faces United hunting only his second goal in 17 games. He has not scored away from Camp Nou in the tournament since September 2015.

"It's one of those things, a coincidence," said Valverde.

But few can dispute Suarez's part in what is now one of the most dominant eras in the history of Spanish football.

Messi's talent stands alone but his partnership with Suarez, a close personal friend, is extraordinary too.

Together they have 66 goals in all competitions this season, 43 for Messi and 23 for Suarez, while in the league they have 53, more than every team in the division, except Real Madrid.

When Messi broke his arm in October and Barca were forced to manage without the Argentinian, Suarez stepped up, scoring six times in five games.

They are now within touching distance of their eighth La Liga title in 11 years, secured, surely, by their 2-0 win over Atletico last weekend, in which Suarez scored the opener in the 85th minute.

It was a curling, long-range shot into the corner, the first that goalkeeper Jan Oblak had conceded from outside the box

Stage set for Pogba to prove his worth to Man Utd

AFP
Manchester, United Kingdom

Head of Barcelona's Champions League trip to Old Trafford, the Catalans' president has admitted even they could not compete with Manchester United's then world record offer to bring Paul Pogba back to England in 2016.

"We couldn't afford that amount of money at the time," Josep Maria Bartomeu told ESPN. "So he went to United, and he's making them better as a team because he's one of the stars of the world of football right now."

However, nearly three years on, United can feel they have still to receive sufficient bang for the bucks they paid to Juventus for Pogba in an £89mn (\$116mn) transfer fee.

The French World Cup winner will start for just the second time in a Champions League knockout game for United today.

Benched for both legs of a bitterly disappointing last 16 exit to Sevilla last season by Jose Mourinho due to personal differences and poor performances, Pogba's only previous start ended in a red card and a 2-0 defeat to Paris Saint-Germain back in February. Without their suspended star, a youthful United side pulled off a miraculous 3-1 win in Paris to make it to the last

eight for the first time in five years and give Pogba another chance to shine on the Champions League stage.

The arrival of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer to replace the sacked Mourinho in December removed any excuses that it was the Portuguese's straitjacket that was limiting the output of one his most talented players.

An upturn in form was immediate. Pogba scored nine goals and created six more in his first 12 games under Solskjaer. However, his form has cooled since, and not by coincidence so has United's with three defeats in their last four games.

MADRID INTEREST?

Pogba has also not done his approval ratings among the United fans any favours by publicly flirting with Real Madrid while away on international duty last month and talking of his admiration for Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane. "He's capable of doing everything. There are midfielders who know how to defend really well, others who are very good in attack. He knows how to do everything," said Zidane. United are entitled to want Pogba to show the potential Zidane spoke of on a more regular basis.

The signing of Pogba was meant to signal United's return to the elite. It is time for him to deliver on the biggest stage.



all season, after 30 previous attempts. "We could only have scored with a goal like that one by Suarez," said Valverde.

With another league title, and

perhaps domestic double, on its way, Barcelona can put the Champions League at the front and centre of their run-in. Suarez will be at the heart of it.



Juventus' Cristiano Ronaldo (left) takes part in a training session in Turin, Italy, yesterday. (Reuters)

Tadic and Ajax set sights on Juve after Bernabeu heroics

AFP
Amsterdam

In the wake of Ajax's stunning victory against holders Real Madrid in the Champions League last 16, the headlines across Europe were mainly about the new golden generation emerging in Amsterdam.

The club of Johan Cruyff, and of Louis van Gaal's side that lifted the trophy in 1995, are into their first Champions League quarter-final since 2003 with a team packed with products of their famed youth system.

Midfielder Frenkie de Jong, aged 21 and headed for Barcelona at the end of the season, and 19-year-old defender Matthijs de Ligt are the brightest young stars in a side that triumphed 4-1 at the Santiago Bernabeu.

However, the most decisive player in this Champions League campaign for Ajax — which continues into today's quarter-final first leg against Juventus — is a grizzled veteran by comparison.

Dusan Tadic, at 30, was the oldest member of coach Erik ten Hag's line-up in Madrid, with the sole exception of 32-year-old Dane Lasse Schoene.

The Serbian international attacker scored one of their goals in Spain, and now has nine altogether in a continental campaign that started with a second qualifying-round win over Sturm Graz. The goal apart, Tadic's display

in Madrid will be best remembered for that moment in the first half when he escaped Casemiro with a sensational turn.

"As time goes by we will realise what we did, but now we just want to enjoy our football and these things will come. It's really special," said Tadic after that match.

Formerly of Groningen and FC Twente, Tadic came back to the Netherlands in an 11.4 million-euro (£10mn) move from Premier League strugglers Southampton last year.

'BIG FISH IN A SMALL POND'

His signing, and that of Daley Blind, the defender rejoining from Manchester United, highlighted part of the strategy at the Johan Cruyff Arena.

The club's decision-makers, with former players Edwin van der Sar and Marc Overmars now respectively chief executive and technical director, needed experience to surround the youngsters.

The main goal for Ajax was reclaiming the Dutch title, last won in 2014. Ten Hag's team are level with PSV Eindhoven at the top of the table with five games left, having recently beaten their rivals 3-1 in Amsterdam. They are into the Dutch Cup final, too.

Tadic has scored 20 league goals, and has added nine assists — those figures make him the most decisive player in the Netherlands since Luis Suarez with Ajax in 2009/10.

PREMIER LEAGUE

Chelsea fans savour Hazard magic, but for how much longer?

'We have won three in a row. For the mentality, it is good to keep going'

Reuters
London

With Real Madrid reportedly lining up a huge offer to tempt Eden Hazard to the Bernabeu next season, Chelsea's fans may wonder how many more times they will be able to savour watching the Belgian maestro at his dazzling best.

An inspired Hazard, whose contract expires next season, scored both goals in the 2-0 victory over West Ham United on Monday, the first a dazzling solo effort that brought back memories of Diego Maradona in his pomp.

His second, in the 90th minute, capped a mesmerising display that took Chelsea to a third consecutive league win.

Manager Maurizio Sarri said having Hazard in such unstoppable form made winning "easy" but appeared almost resigned to losing him.

West Ham's fans might even have enjoyed Hazard's display too, but they took pleasure in teasing the home faithful that the 28-year-old, who joined the club in 2012, might be performing his tricks in front of a new audience next season.

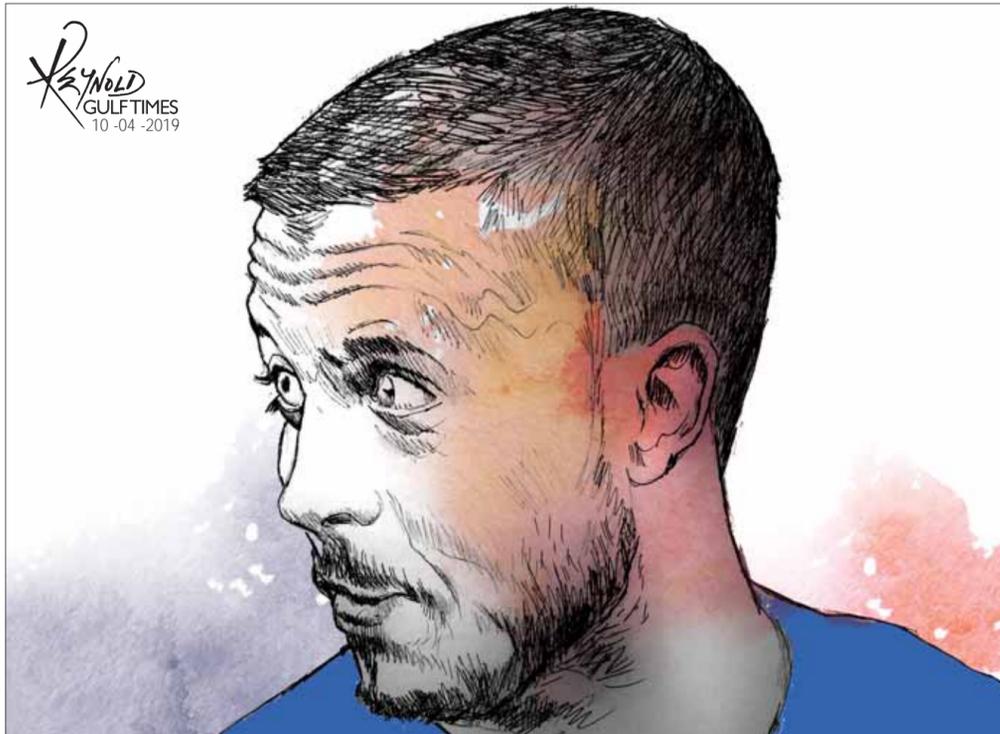
Hazard offered a modicum of comfort afterwards but the fear remains, for Chelsea fans and anyone who enjoys watching a master craftsman at work, that his days in London might be numbered.

"They are wrong," Hazard, who has scored 19 goals in all competitions for Chelsea this season to equal his best haul, said.

"For now I am just focusing on Chelsea until the end of the season. We are in good momentum. We have won three in a row. For the mentality, it is good to keep going. Top four and the Europa League is our target so we need to do well in both."

Victory lifted Chelsea into third place in the Premier League – above London rivals Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur who both have played a game less.

Sarri said he "can do nothing"



to keep Hazard at the club if he wants "another experience".

"We are trying to become one of the best teams in Europe but I have to respect his decision," the Italian said.

"Hazard played a wonderful match. He did well against Brighton too. We are very lucky because it is very easy to win the match when he is able to make that kind of difference."

Asked about the fee of 100 million pounds (\$130 million) Real Madrid are reported to be willing to pay, he added: "It is too cheap in this market! We have seen in the last few windows every price I think. So it is very hard to get another player like him!"

Chelsea's Eden Hazard (centre, also above) in action against West Ham during the EPL match in London on Monday. (AFP)

REYNOLD
GULFTIMES
10-04-2019

RELIEF

Argentina coach Scaloni out of hospital after bicycle accident: Argentine FA

Reuters
Mallorca, Spain

Argentina's national soccer coach Lionel Scaloni has been released from hospital in Mallorca after being hit by a car while riding his bicycle, the Argentine football association said yesterday.

"The Argentina coach, Lionel Scaloni, suffered an accident today while cycling. He is now on his way home after being discharged from hospital," the team's Twitter account said.

Spanish newspaper El Mundo said earlier yesterday that Scaloni, who was named Argentina's permanent coach in November, was taken to the Hospital Universitario Son Espases on the Spanish island with multiple injuries.

Scaloni later posted a picture of himself on his official Twitter account sporting tape above and below his bruised left eye and on his nose and forehead, with the words: "Many thanks for the messages, a few stitches and now

I'm off back home."

Scaloni will oversee the team's Copa America campaign this year, with Argentina bidding to win their first major trophy since 1993.

The 40-year-old made seven appearances for his country as a defender and had a long, varied career which began at Newell's Old Boys, in Rosario in central Argentina.

His longest spell at one club came at Deportivo La Coruna, where he won the La Liga title in 2000, while he also played for Racing Santander and Mallorca in Spain plus West Ham United and Lazio and Atalanta, retiring from playing in 2015.

He became assistant to Jorge Sampaoli at La Liga outfit Sevilla in 2016 and followed him when he became coach of Argentina in 2017.

Sampaoli was sacked in the wake of the side's disastrous 2018 World Cup campaign and their last-16 defeat to France, but Scaloni stayed on as caretaker coach before being handed the job on a permanent basis in November.



Assault trial of Russian footballers begins

AFP
Moscow

The trial of Russian footballers Pavel Mamaev and Alexander Kokorin began in Moscow yesterday, six months after their drunken night out in the Russian capital ended in assault charges. Mamaev, a midfielder for Krasnodar, and Zenit Saint Petersburg forward Kokorin – as well as two other defendants, including Kokorin's younger brother – have been held in Moscow's Butyrka prison since October.

Russian media on Tuesday aired footage of the four handcuffed men rushed from a police van to the Presnensky court, where the hearing is taking place.

According to the Russian press, the trial could last up to two months. In October the pair attacked the driver of a television host, damaging her Mercedes. She was hospitalised with injuries.

They were then caught on video attacking two Russian trade ministry officials in an upscale cafe, hitting one, an ethnic Korean, with a chair while referring to his Asian appearance.

Several days later, they were ordered to be detained pending trial for "hooliganism." Both are Russian internationals though Kokorin last played for the national side in late 2017, while Mamaev was last selected in 2016.

The attacks caused outrage in Russia, especially as Mamaev and Kokorin have been in trouble before after partying. The Russian Football Union suspended the pair in July 2016 after a video emerged from a Monte Carlo night club in which Mamaev and Kokorin allegedly spent \$296,000 (258,000 euros) on a champagne-fuelled party following Euro 2016, where Russia flopped. Earlier this month, a court again extended their detention until September 25.

Revamped Copa America to take place in north-south zones in 2020

Reuters
Rio de Janeiro

The 2020 Copa America will mark a tournament revamp, with six teams beginning the campaign in a north zone in Colombia and six playing in a south zone in co-hosts Argentina,

the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) said yesterday. Argentina will be in the southern group, alongside Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and an as yet undisclosed guest. Brazil will feature in the northern group with Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and another invited nation. The teams will play each other once in

their groups, and the top four sides in each group will then qualify for the quarter-finals. The final is to be played in Argentina. The changes are part of a widespread attempt to revitalise South American club and international competitions and bring them more into line with Europe. CONMEBOL have abandoned their six-decades long tradition of playing

the Copa Libertadores final on a home-and-away basis, and will this year play the final at a neutral ground for the first time, much like the Champions League. Next year's Copa America will be the fourth in six years. Officials want the tournament to be played at the same time as the European Championship, Europe's equivalent.

SPOTLIGHT

Pele back in Brazil after hospital stay

AFP
Sao Paulo

Football great Pele arrived back in Brazil yesterday after having surgery for a "severe urinary infection" during a six-day hospital stay in France.

The three-time World Cup winner was discharged late Monday from the private American hospital in the Paris suburbs where he had been taken after falling ill following an appearance at a promotional event with France striker Kylian Mbappe.

After arriving at the Sao Paulo-Guarulhos airport in Brazil, the 78-year-old was taken through the terminal in a wheelchair and was driven away in a van.

"Once again, thank God, everything went well. I'm alive. Long live Brazil," said Pele, a gold cross hanging around his neck, after he arrived in Brazil's biggest city. "I would like to take this op-



PSG's Brazilian forward Neymar (left) posted this picture with Pele on social media on Monday.

portunity to thank all the Brazilians and all those who called the hospital, who called me, for my operation, to wish me a rapid recovery," he added.

In a statement on Monday on the Globoesporte.com site, Pele said he had required "medical assistance and surgery" for a "severe urinary infection".

Before he was discharged, current Brazil star Neymar, who plays alongside Mbappe for Paris Saint-Germain, paid him a visit at the hospital. Neymar posted a photo on his Instagram account Monday of himself next to a smiling Pele in his hospital bed with the two holding hands.

Brazil's G1 reported that Pele had intended to come out of hospital on Saturday to return to his home country, but had been delayed by further tests.

The infection was not serious and was under control, members of Pele's entourage had said.

Pele has had several health scares in recent years. A similar infection put him in intensive care in November 2014.

In 2016, Pele, who played 1,363 professional matches, scoring 1,281 goals, was unable to light the flame at the Rio Olympics because of severe pain in the hip.

In January 2018, he cancelled a trip to London fearing a "stressful" and "tiring" journey.

BACKING

Sterling gets Van Dijk's vote for PFA player of the year

Reuters
Bengaluru

Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk says he voted for Manchester City's Raheem Sterling to be named PFA player of the year.

Van Dijk is one of the favourites for the award after helping Liverpool deliver a sustained Premier League title challenge, while Sterling has scored 15 league goals for City, their rivals for the league crown.

"I voted for Raheem Sterling," Van Dijk told reporters. "I did what I thought and I thought he deserves it. He's had a fantastic season. I could have voted for Bernardo Silva as well and another couple of players from Manchester City."

"But I'm just being honest. I think he has improved a lot as a player."



Manchester City's Raheem Sterling (left) and teammate Benjamin Mendy take part in a training session in London on Monday. (AFP)

PFA rules prohibit players from voting for their teammates.

Liverpool, who have kept 17 clean sheets in the league this season, are also still in the hunt for the Champions League trophy and play Porto in the first leg of their quarter-final later on Tuesday.

Van Dijk said he was focused on winning with the team, not

on individual accolades. "Individual trophies? I don't know," the Dutchman added. "Of course, you're going to be proud, that's something you have to be, but all the hard work in the training ground is something we all did together."

"It is to win something as a team, a collective thing as a club. Hopefully that is something that will happen."

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

All-round Chennai thrash Kolkata to go top of table

Chahar scalps three wickets, Du Plessis scores an unbeaten 43 in seven-wicket win

IAN S
Chennai

All-round Chennai Super Kings made short work of Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR), thrashing them by seven wickets in a lopsided Indian Premier League (IPL) encounter here yesterday.

The victory saw the defending champions replace KKR at the top of the eight-team points table with 10 points from six matches.

KKR, meanwhile, dropped down to second spot, having eight points from six outings.

After being asked to bat first by home team skipper MS Dhoni, the visitors managed just 108/9, riding Andre Russell's unbeaten yet uncharacteristic 44-ball 50.

Deepak Chahar (3 for 20) scalped three wickets and was well supported by veteran spinners Harbhajan Singh (2 for 15) and Imran Tahir (2 for 21).

Chasing a paltry 109 for victory, Chennai were never in trouble as South Africa captain Faf du Plessis carried his bat with an unbeaten 43 off 45 balls, his innings studded with three fours.

After the hosts lost Shane Watson (17) and Suresh Raina (14) inside the powerplay with Sunil Narine (2 for 24) taking both the wickets, du Plessis and Ambati Rayudu (21) stitched together a 46-run third wicket partnership, mostly scoring off singles.

Once Rayudu was out, caught by Nitish Rana at short extra cover off Piyush Chawla, Kedar Jadhav (8 not out) joined hands with du Plessis to take the team over the line with 16 balls to spare.

Earlier, Chahar shaved off the KKR top order early as Chennai never allowed the visitors to get an upper hand.

Chennai even kept Russell quiet as the big-hitting West Indian hit five fours and three sixes but never got into the groove.

KKR never really got going and it looked like they would not cross the 100-run mark before Russell — struggling with niggles — hit Scott Kuggeleijn for one six and two fours as the purple brigade managed to get 15 runs off the last over.

Russell was dropped when he was batting on 8 by Harbhajan which was a difficult chance.

KKR were reduced to 24 for 4 inside the first five overs, largely due to Chahar who bowled a superb first spell of 3-0-14-3.

He first trapped Chris Lynn (0) in front to then account for the wicket of Rana (0) who hit a rising delivery straight to Am-



Chennai Super Kings' Deepak Chahar bowls during the 2019 Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 match against Kolkata Knight Riders at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai, India, yesterday. (AFP)



Kolkata Knight Riders' Andre Russell hit an unbeaten 50 to take the total past 100. (AFP)

bati Rayudu at midwicket.

In between those two wickets, Harbhajan continued his rich vein of form with the ball by removing Narine (6) with a tossed

up delivery that the West Indian top-edged to Chahar who ran backwards from point to complete an excellent catch.

The Rajasthan pacer then got

the back of Robin Uthappa (11) who was guilty of trying to play one shot too many, and holing out to Jadhav at deep square leg.

Dinesh Karthik (19) and

Shubman Gill (9) then tried to stem the rot but just when the pair looked to have settled in, Karthik hit straight to midwicket where Harbhajan took a sharp catch off Tahir.

Tahir removed Gill too with a googly that slipped through between inside edge and leg for Dhoni to take the bails off behind the stumps.

Russell and Chawla (8) joined hands for a 29-run stand for the seventh wicket but once Harbhajan sent the latter back with a delivery that spun sharply away from the batsman for Dhoni to effect an easy stumping, it was all downhill for the visitors.

Kuldeep Yadav and Prasad Krishna did not trouble the scorers with Harry Gurney (1 not out) staying till the end with Russell.

BRIEF SCORES: Kolkata Knight Riders 108 for 9 (Andre Russell 50; Deepak Chahar 3 for 20, Harbhajan Singh 2 for 15, Imran Tahir 2 for 21) **lost to Chennai Super Kings 111 for 3** in 17.2 overs (Faf du Plessis 43 not out; Sunil Narine 2 for 24) **by seven wickets**

PREVIEW

Mumbai have home advantage against in-form Punjab

IAN S
Mumbai

Having won their last three games at home, Kings XI Punjab will now head to the iconic Wankhede Stadium to take on Mumbai Indians in what is expected to be a mouth-watering clash in the Indian Premier League. Both teams have defeated Sunrisers Hyderabad in their last games. While MI thrashed SRH by 40 runs, KXIP won by six wickets.

But today will be a new day and both teams know that carrying the momentum forward is an integral part of the IPL and while KXIP sit pretty on the third spot in the points table with four wins from six games, MI are fifth with three wins from five games. With the league closing in on the middle stage, each team will now look to grab the advantage and surge forward.

Playing at home, it will obviously be an added advantage for Mumbai as they know the ground conditions well. But the boys need to fire in unison against a quality KXIP outfit and skipper Rohit Sharma will look to lead by example. Having failed to put on a quality show so far in this edition of the cash-rich league, Rohit would be looking to use this opportunity to strike some form.

The rest of the squad has fired in patches with all-rounder Hardik Pandya putting on a consistent show. While he has provided the finish in the business end of the innings, Pandya would definitely want the others to provide him an even better platform to tee off in style.

For Punjab, it has been a slowish sort of display from the batsman. While it cannot be denied that they have played their last two games on conditions that weren't best for batting — in Chennai and Mohali — the wicket in Wankhede should aid stroke play and considering the



All-rounder Hardik Pandya has put on a consistent show for Mumbai Indians. (AFP)

form that the likes of KL Rahul and Mayank Agarwal are in, they would be waiting to put on their pads and take strike.

All in all, it should be a good contest between two quality units looking to keep the winning momentum going.

SQUADS

Mumbai Indians: Rohit Sharma, Quinton de Kock, Suryakumar Yadav, Krunal Pandya, Yuvraj Singh, Kieron Pollard, Hardik Pandya, Ben Cutting, Mitchell McClenaghan, Rasikh Salam, Jasprit Bumrah, Ishan Kishan, Evin Lewis, Aditya Tare, Anmolpreet Singh, Rahul Chahar, Mayank Markande, Barinder Sran, Jayant Yadav, Anukul Roy, Siddhesh Lad, Pankaj Jaiswal

Kings XI Punjab: Chris Gayle, Lokesh Rahul, Mayank Agarwal, Sarfaraz Khan, Nicholas Pooran, Mandeep Singh, Sam Curran, Ravichandran Ashwin, Mohammed Shami, Muejeb Ur Rahman, Ankit Rajpoot, Karun Nair, David Miller, Andrew Tye, Moises Henriques, Varun Chakravarthy, Murugan Ashwin, Simran Singh, Hardus Viljoen, Arshdeep Singh, Darshan Nalkande, Agnivesh Ayachi, Harpreet Brar

Pandya deposes before Jain; Rahul to meet today

IAN S
New Delhi

India all-rounder Hardik Pandya has deposed before the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) ombudsman and ethics officer DK Jain in Mumbai in connection with his controversial comments in a chat show. India opener KL Rahul is expected to depose today morning.

While Pandya is a part of Mumbai Indians in the ongoing Indian Premier League (IPL), Rahul is plying his trade for Kings XI Punjab and the two teams are set to face each other at the Wankhede Stadium today. Speaking to IANS, a senior

board functionary said the ombudsman is expected to submit his report to the Supreme Court-appointed Committee of Administrators (CoA) before the national selectors sit for the selection of the Indian team for the 2019 World Cup. "While there is no timeline as such, but we are hopeful the ombudsman will submit his report on the duo before MSK Prasad and his team sits for the selection meeting in Mumbai on Monday. Nobody can read the mind of another individual, but the punishment cannot be bigger than the crime. Let's see what the ombudsman's report says about the two," the functionary said.

SPOTLIGHT

Buttler ends 'Mankad' row with Ashwin

AFP
New Delhi

England's Jos Buttler has declared an end to his showdown with Indian spinner Ravichandran Ashwin after being dismissed by a "Mankad" runout in the Indian Premier League.

The Rajasthan Royals star had a heated exchange with the captain of Kings XI Punjab after being run out at the non-striker's end while backing up in an incident that sparked an international debate on the "spirit of cricket".

Buttler told the *Times of India* he had looked at replays and was sure he should not have been given out. "But it's all done now and I have moved on."

The dismissal, named after former India player Vinoo Mankad, is legal but is seen by many as unsporting unless the batsman has been warned first.

Buttler said he did speak with Ashwin after the March 25 runout which even brought disapproval from the MCC, the arbiter

of the game's rules.

"I just asked him if he really wishes to play the game that way. Whether he thought it was the right thing to do," Buttler said. "And he obviously thought it was, in his opinion."

Ashwin, who has been unrepentant of his act, seemed to have waited for Buttler to leave his crease before clipping off the bails.

Buttler, who was a victim of a Mankad dismissal by Sri Lanka's Sachithra Senanayake in 2014, said he "will make sure it doesn't happen again".

With minds already turning to the World Cup which starts May 30 soon after the IPL ends, Buttler said the title was an open race.

"We are one of the favourites. Traditionally, in World Cup, India and Australia are up there as well," the hard-hitting batsman-wicketkeeper said.

"We are playing some really good cricket. But World Cup tournaments, knockout tournaments are always high pressure situations," he said of the tournament.

COMMENT

Consistency key for dangerous WI at World Cup: Lara

Reuters
Mumbai

West Indies are replete with match-winners but consistency will be key to their success in English conditions at this year's World Cup, batting great **Brian Lara** has said.

Teeming with tearaway fast bowlers and aggressive batsmen, West Indies were once considered invincible and won the opening two editions of the World Cup in 1975 and 1979.

Their glory days, however, are long over and the twice winners had to go through a qualifying tournament to book their spot in the 10-team tournament in England and Wales.

The last bilateral series won for West Indies, who are ranked ninth in one-day internationals, came in 2014 but they showed signs of improvement against England.

Jason Holder's men drew a

five-match ODI series against top-ranked England 2-2 at home recently, in a timely boost before the May 30-July 14 showpiece event.

The likes of opening batsman Chris Gayle, all-rounder Andre Russell and spinner Sunil Narine are also much in demand in Twenty20 leagues across the globe.

"Look at the Indian Premier League, look at the leagues around the world, we have got players that are the most wanted in the world," Lara, 49, told reporters in Mumbai at a promotional event last week.

"We have got match-winners, but we are going to need a little more than match-winners in English conditions to win the World Cup. We need a team that can create consistency.

"If we can get to the knock-out stages, we can knock out any team. We have seen that in the past. But consistency is going to take us right through to the finals."

Former West Indies captain



Lara, considered one of the very best the Caribbean islands have ever produced, retired after the 2007 World Cup at home with over 10,000 runs in ODIs. He also scored close to 12,000 runs in Tests. Lara credited franchise leagues like the IPL for creating interest among kids in the West

NBA

Led by Harden, Rockets streaking into the playoffs

With the NBA playoffs less than a week away, the Houston Rockets are playing their best basketball of the season - which should have other teams worried

DPA
Washington

As the NBA playoffs arrive later this week, no team is playing better than the Houston Rockets. That should have every other team worried - including the two-time defending champion Golden State Warriors.

Sunday's 149-113 obliteration of Phoenix was Houston's sixth straight win, the longest current streak of any team. Led by Most Valuable Player candidate James Harden, the Rockets have won 20 of their last 23 games, with their only losses to conference leaders Golden State and Milwaukee and an overtime setback to Memphis. And they are surpassing league and team standards along the way.

"We understand that we're playing for something and we're all trying to stay sharp," point guard Chris Paul said.

A year ago, the Rockets won 65 games and were on the verge of dethroning the Warriors when Paul suffered a hamstring injury in Game Five of the Western Conference finals. With Paul sidelined, Golden State won the final two games and the series.

The Rockets (53-28) sputtered to start this season. On December 9, they were 11-14 and next to last in the West. Since then, Houston is 42-14, the conference's best mark.

During their current streak, the Rockets are averaging 127.5 points and winning by 26.2 points. They tied their own NBA mark with 26 three-pointers vs Sacramento on March 30, then broke it with 27 vs Phoenix, when they also had a season high in points. On Thursday,

Houston held New York to 16 first-quarter points, its best defensive opening period of the season.

"We're building very, very good habits no matter who we play," Harden said. "That's our mindset, that's what we preach, and that's what we've been talking about."

And if you're wondering whether the Rockets are just beating up on bad teams recently, consider that since the All-Star break, they have the league's best record (20-4) and scoring margin (11.4) and are second in points allowed per 100 possessions (104.6).

Leading the way has been Harden, who likely will finish second to "Greek Freak" Giannis Antetokounmpo of Milwaukee in MVP voting despite averaging 36.1 points - the best since Michael Jordan's 37.1 points in 1986-87 - with 7.6 assists and 6.6 rebounds.

But Paul, Swiss centre Clint Capela and guard Eric Gordon are healthy, forward Kenneth Faried and guard Austin Rivers have been key in-season additions and forward P.J. Tucker provides his nightly grit.



Most Valuable Player candidate James Harden. PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports

"We have a great group of veteran guys that understand what's at stake here," assistant Jeff Bzdelik said. "Continuing to build our championship habits because the playoffs are going to be starting (soon), so we need to make sure we continue to get better. It's understood that every game is a play-

off-implication game."

The Rockets aren't entirely healthy. Coach Mike D'Antoni has missed the last two games with stomach flu and may skip the season finale at Oklahoma City on Tuesday. Every other West playoff team plays Wednesday.

Houston could catch Denver (53-27) for

second in the West or fall behind Portland (51-29) for fourth. But no matter where they finish, the Rockets are ready for the playoffs.

"Just hooping and worrying about us," Paul said. "We're one of the teams that, every night, as long as we play the way we're capable of, we should win."

SPOTLIGHT

LeBron defends Walton record amid job speculation

AFF
Los Angeles

LeBron James has defended Luke Walton's record amid ongoing speculation concerning the Los Angeles Lakers coach's future with the franchise.

Walton is widely expected to be shown the door by the Lakers at the end of the season after a disappointing campaign which saw them fail to make the playoffs for a sixth straight year.

However James said injuries and suspensions throughout the campaign left Walton short of resources for key parts of the season.

James cited the suspensions handed down to Rajon Rondo and Brandon Ingram in the first game of the season as well as a litany of injuries as reasons for the team's problems.

"No one expects for a suspension to happen on opening night," James told Spectrum Sportsnet television in an interview.

"No one expects for injuries to happen the way they did with our franchise this year. Where your starting point guard is out for numerous games. Your starting small

forward is out. "I'm not talking two or three games here, everyone is back in the lineup. We're talking like 15, 20, 25 games."

The Lakers injury toll also included James, who missed 17 games between the end of December and February after suffering a groin strain.

The NBA superstar's absence - the longest injury lay-off of his career - triggered a slump which saw the team fall out of playoff contention in the Western Conference.

James said that when all of the Lakers' key personnel was fit, the team had been a match for most other sides in the league.

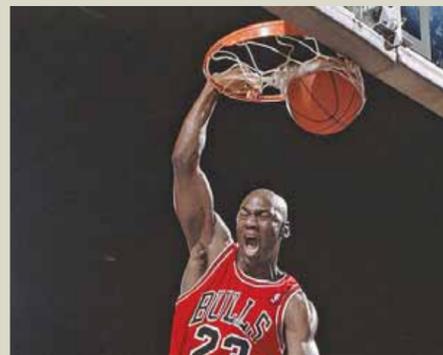
"We had a defensive rating of fourth in the NBA, and we were like seventh in offense when we played together over 23 games," James said.

"As good as that is, it's not enough for Luke to even know what he has on a consistent basis, when you don't have a consistent roster every night during the season."

"Like you said, control what you can control and you've got to play the hand you're dealt. I think he played the hand as well as he could."

The Lakers wrap up their campaign on Tuesday against the Portland Trail Blazers.

Jordan the G.O.A.T for today's NBA stars: poll



Michael Jordan and not LeBron James is the greatest player of all time, according to a survey of NBA players published by *The Athletic* on Monday. The sports news website polled 127 NBA players between March 16 and April 1 for its inaugural anonymous player survey, asking subjects a range of questions about the sport.

On the question of which player deserved to be recognised as the greatest in history, the verdict of the 122 players who answered the question was unanimous. According to the survey, 73% believe six-time NBA champion Jordan is the greatest player the sport has seen. James came in second with 11.9% of votes, ahead of Kobe Bryant with 10.6%. The poll also revealed that

James Harden is most players' pick to win this season's MVP honours.

Houston Rockets star Harden, the 2017-2018 MVP, was chosen by 44.3% of respondents, with Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo just behind with 38.9% of the votes. Oklahoma City Thunder's Paul George was third with 12.7%.

Antetokounmpo however was the clear favourite for players asked who they would attempt to build a new franchise around.

The towering Greek star was chosen by 36.4% of players asked who they would sign first if they were building a roster from scratch.

New Orleans Pelicans ace Anthony Davis was second with 10.4% of votes while Joel Embiid (8.8%) was third.

MLB

Encarnacion homers twice in an inning in Mariners win

Reuters
Kansas City

Edwin Encarnacion hit a pair of home runs in the sixth inning and the visiting Seattle Mariners scored eight times in the frame to earn a 13-5 victory over the Kansas City Royals on Monday night to open a four-game series.

The Mariners have scored five or more runs in 11 of their first 12 games and became the first team in the major leagues to win 10 games.

Encarnacion became the first major leaguer to hit two home runs in an inning in almost three years. Mark Trumbo of the Los Angeles Angels did it on April 15, 2016, at Texas.

The last Mariners players to do it were Bret Boone and Mike Cameron, who did it in the same game at the Chicago White Sox on May 2, 2002. Cameron went on to hit four home runs that game, tying the major league record.

Roenis Elias (1-0) picked up the win for the Mariners. The left-hander pitched three scoreless innings of relief, giving up no hits and one walk.

Homer Bailey (0-1) took the loss for Kansas City, giving up seven runs on eight hits, including three home runs, in five-plus innings.

The Royals' Whit Merrifield led off the bottom of the first with an infield single to

RESULTS		
Mariners	13-5	Royals
Orioles	12-4	A's
Cubs	10-0	Pirates
Braves	8-6	Rockies
Astros	4-3	Yankees
Angels	5-2	Brewers
Padres	6-5	Giants
Phillies	4-3	Nationals
Rays	5-1	White Sox
Cardinals	4-3	Dodgers

extend his hitting streak to 29 games. It's the second-longest streak in Royals history, trailing only George Brett's 30-game streak from 1980, the year Brett batted 390.

Mariners starter Felix Hernandez left the game after one inning with "virus-like symptoms." He gave up two runs on three hits.

Daniel Vogelbach's leadoff home run in the second inning gave the Mariners a home run in each of their first 12 games, becoming the fourth American League team since 1908 to accomplish that feat.

They finished with five home runs Monday, giving them 32 for the season, the most in major league history through the first 12 games.

Seattle grabbed its first lead on Encarnacion's third home run of the year leading off

the sixth. The Mariners sent 12 batters to the plate in the sixth.

DODGERS RYU HEADED TO IL WITH GROIN INJURY

Los Angeles left-hander Hyun-Jin Ryu exited his Monday road start against the St. Louis Cardinals due to a left groin strain, and he will go on the injured list Tuesday, Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. Last year, a torn left groin muscle sidelined Ryu from early May to mid-August. "It was different from the pain I felt last year," Ryu said Monday night through an interpreter, via MLB.com. "It was more of a precautionary measure to come out of the game. So compared to the left groin injury I had last year, right now I feel better."

The 32-year-old South Korean entered Monday's game 2-0 with a 2.08 ERA through two starts this year. The Cardinals got to him Monday for two runs on two hits and a walk in 1 2/3 innings en route to a 4-3 victory.

Ryu went 7-3 with a 1.97 ERA in 15 starts for Los Angeles last year, then was 1-2 with a 5.21 ERA in four postseason starts. For his career, Ryu is 42-28 with a 3.19 ERA in 100 career regular-season appearances (99 starts).

Seattle Mariners designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion watches his three run home run in the sixth inning against the Kansas City Royals at Kauffman Stadium.

PICTURE: USA TODAY Sports



DOHA DIAMOND LEAGUE

Cheruiyot, Kipruto, and Obiri to headline Kenyan challenge

'Of course I have great memories of Doha which is where I set my African 3000m record of 8:20.68 in 2014. I am excited to race in the Khalifa International Stadium next month'

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Four reigning Diamond League champions from Kenya including Hellen Obiri will be competing at the Doha Diamond League – the first stage of the 2019 IAAF Diamond League – which will take place in the state-of-the-art Khalifa International Stadium for the first time on May 3.

Obiri, who will contest the 3000m in Doha, has already made a piece of history this year by winning gold at the IAAF World Cross Country Championships in Aarhus, Denmark. In doing so, she became the first athlete – male or female – to win titles at the IAAF World Championships, IAAF World Indoor Championships, IAAF World Cross Country Championships as well as the IAAF World Relays.

"It was a difficult race but I was determined to win as it was one of the few titles missing from my collection. However my focus is now on the track," said Obiri, who prevailed on what many observers rated to be the toughest ever course for a World Cross Country Championships.

Obiri is also the reigning world 5000m champion and she will be looking to start her track campaign on a high as she builds up to the IAAF World Championships Doha 2019 from September 27 to October 6.

"Of course I have great memories of Doha which is where I set my African 3000m record of 8:20.68 in 2014. I am excited to race in the Khalifa International Stadium next month and I also look forward to returning for the World Championships later this year when I plan to contest both the 5000m and 10,000m," she said.

Obiri is unbeaten in 2019 but her winning streak will be put to the test in Doha. The Ethiopian contingent can always rely on raucous crowd support in Doha and their challenge is headed by world indoor record-holder Genzebe Dibaba, the winner of the last three titles over 3000m at the World Indoor Championships. Obiri also faces opposition from teammates Caroline Kipkirui – who won in Doha twelve months ago in 8:29.05 – as well as world 3000m steeplechase record-holder Beatrice Chepkoech and former world cross country champion Agnes Tirop.

KIPRUTO AND EL BAKKALI TO RENEW RIVALRY

Another eagerly awaited clash on the track is the men's 3000m steeplechase which features both Kenya's reigning world and Olympic champion Consensus Kipruto and Morocco's Soufiane El Bakkali, who set a world-leading time of 7:58.15 in 2018.

They were involved in one of the most dramatic and unforgettable races of the 2018 Diamond League season in Zurich where Kipruto overhauled El Bakkali in



the home straight to clinch the Diamond League title – 8:10.15 to 8:10.19 – despite losing his left spike on the second lap.

"That was a victory I will never forget. I had a lot of pain in my left foot but I fought until the end," said Kipruto.

"I am looking forward to opening my track season here in Doha where I expect another tough race against Soufiane. My main goal in 2019 is to defend my title at the World Championships but I want to start my track season with a victory here."

The line-up also features fellow Kenyans Amos Kirui, Benjamin Kigen and Leonard Bett along with Ethiopia's Chala Beyo, who won the 3000m steeplechase when it was a non-Diamond League event last year.

KORIR, CHERUIYOT TO HIGHLIGHT MIDDLE DISTANCE ACTION

Emmanuel Korir began his unbeaten campaign on the Diamond League circuit last year with victory over 800m in Doha and he will be seeking a repeat performance this year – albeit on a different track.

"I'm delighted to be kicking off my DL season in Doha. I've had a long build up through the off-season in Nairobi and can't wait to race the best in the world

once again. My aim is to be back here in October for the World Championships so it's a unique chance to experience the new track," said Korir, who moved to sixth on the world all-time list with 1:42.05 in London before winning the Diamond League title in Brussels.

Korir faces opposition from Botswana's former Olympic silver medalist Nijel Amos – the joint third fastest 800m runner in history – who handed Korir his sole defeat of the 2018 season at the African Championships in Asaba, Nigeria.

One of the in-form runners during the indoor season was the United States' Donovan Brazier who is making his racing debut in Doha. Only 21, Brazier set a national indoor 800m record of 1:44.41 and also broke the world indoor 600m record at his domestic championships with 1:13.77.

Other standout names include multiple European champions Adam Kszczot and Marcin Lewandowski from Poland and the recently crowned European indoor champion Alvaro de Arriba from Spain.

There is also a strong Kenyan presence in the 1500m with training partners Timothy Cheruiyot and Elijah Manangoi both confirmed.



Manangoi had the beating of Cheruiyot at both the Commonwealth Games and African Championships last year but Cheruiyot overturned these results to win the Diamond League final in Zurich – 3:30.27 to 3:31.16. "I'm delighted to be kicking off my Diamond League season in Doha. I've had a long winter of training in Nairobi and I can't wait to race the best in the world once again."

"My aim is to be back here in October for the World Championships so it's a unique chance to experience the new track," said Cheruiyot, who broke the 3:30-barrier for the distance twice on the Diamond League circuit in 2018.

Ronald Kwemoi, who won the 3000m in Doha two years ago, returns to action after a low-key season in 2018 while other leading runners on the start-line include Djibouti's former world indoor champion Ayanleh Souleiman and 2012 Olympic bronze medalist Abdelaati Iguidir from Morocco. Elijah Manangoi's younger brother George, the reigning world U18 and U20 1500m champion, also competes.

Tickets for the Doha Diamond League are available at <https://www.q-tickets.com/qoc/eventdetails.aspx?ki=nkN8d2wvvc=>

SQUASH

Great results for Aspire Academy at Luxembourg Open



Aspire Academy's squash team gave a strong performance at the Luxembourg Junior Open with Waleed Zaman winning in the U-17 category and Salem al-Malki securing third place in the U-15s.

As a regular junior tour event, this year's Luxembourg Junior Open saw an increase in participation from players across Europe. It was a well-run event, providing excellent competition for the six Aspire players competing as the tournament looks to gain Grand Prix status on the calendar next season.

The highlight of the weekend came from Grade 11 student Waleed Zaman, who won his first European junior event with victory in the U-17 age group. After dominating the opening two games of the final, Waleed withstood a comeback from Belgian Antoine Allard to narrowly take the fourth game and claim the title 11-4, 11-6, 6-11, 15-13. Having fought hard at previous European events,

Waleed's coaching staff were delighted to see him make such a breakthrough.

In the Under-15 event, Grade 8 student Salem al-Malki also performed well to take 3rd place. This included a win over the competition's number two seed and showed his growing tactical prowess. With one year remaining in this age group, Salem has made considerable improvement since the start of this season.

Ibrahim al-Darwish also did well to qualify for the main draw of the Under-17 event. He beat the number seven seed before being knocked out by teammate Waleed Zaman. Unfortunately, a hamstring strain then forced Ibrahim to withdraw from his final two matches to avoid further injury.

In the Under-19 event, Ahmad al-Meraikhi took 6th place. Yousef al-Kubaisi also ranked 6th in the Under 15 category. Grade 7 student Abdulrahman Ajineh managed to qualify for the U-13 age category and finished in 14th place.

Australia can be surprise package at World Cup, says Gregan

Australia's most capped player George Gregan has backed the Wallabies to surprise a few people at this year's Rugby World Cup if they can overcome the inconsistencies that have plagued them for the last three years. The Wallabies endured their worst test campaign in 60 years in 2018, winning four out of 13 matches and slumping to sixth in the world rankings. However, former scrumhalf Gregan, who scored 99 points in 139 internationals, believes Michael Cheika's men can peak come tournament time in September, just as they did in 2015 when they reached the final. "They do have time

in a World Cup year, which is a unique year. It is about getting it right when you get over here," said Gregan in an interview with Reuters in Sapporo. "I just see the margins now, particularly amongst the top eight teams, getting smaller and smaller."

"They can flip that switch, they have that in them." However, Gregan, who is in Japan in his role as ambassador for World Cup sponsor Land Rover, warned that Cheika's men will have to show improvement in the reduced Rugby Championship that begins in July to then be serious contenders at the right time.

SPOTLIGHT

ICSS INSIGHT highlights the challenges of protecting intellectual property rights

ICSS INSIGHT joined global leaders of sport and telecommunication, gathered at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum hosted by World Intellectual Property Organisation in Geneva, which provided a platform for exchanging information, knowledge and best practices while identifying emerging trends in ICT.

The forum which was themed "Information and Communication Technologies for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals" brought together the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for development' community.

During a thought-provoking panel discussion on 'Creating Value in the Sport Industry: The Role of IPRs', ICSS INSIGHT raised the issue of emerging threats and risks which challenge sport media during Major Sport Events (MSE) and highlighted the increasingly important role of intellectual property rights.

Speaking of protecting the intellectual property rights and



Delegates pose at the summit.

challenges faced by sport media institutions, Diogo Guia, Director, Sports Public Policy, International Centre for Sport Security said: "To ensure long-term protection of the integrity and values of sport in its various dimensions, it is absolutely critical to adopt a co-ordinated

approach at a global level to respect and protect IP rights. IP Rights play a central role beyond the financial sustainability of major sport events, as it is directly linked through patents, copyrights, trademarks, designs, trade secrets and so forth to the very essence of both

sport and IP, which is fair competition. We must strive to work together, addressing the multiple challenges with optimism, creativity and ambition so sport continues delivering to society in the unique way it does, as wanted and legitimately expected from citizens."

AMIR CUP SHOOTING CHAMPIONSHIP



First-placed Zainab Buftaim (Centre), second-placed Dana al-Mubarak (left) and third-placed Nasra Mohamed celebrate on the podium for the 10m Air Pistol at the Amir Cup Shooting and Archery Championship at the Losail Shooting Ranges yesterday. Elizaveta Shakhova won her third gold medal of the championship by winning the 10m air rifle event.

SPOTLIGHT

Davies, Mir emerge champions in Mercedes golf

Nasser Bin Khaled Automobiles, the Authorized General Distributor of Mercedes-Benz in Qatar, hosted the fourth Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament that took place on April 6 at Education City Golf Club, with the participation of Mercedes-Benz car owners & golf enthusiasts in Qatar.

Following three successful tournaments, the fourth edition of the Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament gathered 88 players in three main categories: Men A (0-12 handicap), Men B (13-28 handicap) and Women.

Organised and hosted by Nasser Bin Khaled Automobiles, the Authorized General Distributor of Mercedes-Benz in Qatar, the annual Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament was inaugurated in 2016 to promote sports and act as a gathering platform for Mercedes-Benz owners in a relaxing and interactive atmosphere. The tournament is a part of the International Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament that is organised by Mercedes-Benz in different countries.

Ihab El Feky, Chief opera-

tions Officer-Auto, at Nasser Bin Khaled Group said: "Nasser Bin Khaled Automobiles continues its legacy in promoting sports and hosting social events that enhance the relations among Mercedes-Benz cars owners, to celebrate together in a relaxing and fun atmosphere away from work stress. This fourth edition of the trophy complements our successful record of three editions to promote sports and social engagement with our valued customers and golf enthusiasts in Qatar."

"We thank our partners and sponsors: Ziebart, Total and Education City Golf club, all the players for their participation, and also congratulate the winners of the fourth edition of the cup which is now a key event in Qatar's social and sports calendar."

The sessions witnessed healthy competition in three categories, where Simon Roger Davies won the first place in Men's Category A, while Paul Kelly and Shehryar Arshad got the second and third places respectively.

In Men's Category B, Sanjay Jain reserved the first place fol-



Winners of the Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament pose with their trophies.

lowed by Tassaduq Bandey in the second place and Jake Couper in the third. In the women's cat-

egory, Nada Mir won the trophy, while Beth San Jose was the first runner-up and Tasnin Kaz was

the second runner-up. Besides, four players received special prizes for their excep-

tional performance, including Paul Kelly for the longest drive, Arnab Jai for longest putt holed, while Saad Awan for the nearest to the rope, and Nguyen Anh for the nearest to the pin.

All participants got valuable gifts from NBK Automobiles and event while the winners received their trophies and prizes during the gala awards ceremony.

The tournament reflects NBK Automobiles and Mercedes-Benz's appreciation to patrons of the luxury brand and is designed to create an interactive community sports event that brings people together to celebrate the values and ethos of the brand known for excellence, luxury and quality.

This year, Ziebart, Total and Education City Golf club are the sponsors of the fourth Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament.

The fourth Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament also gathered media from Qatar who attended a full day of joy and excitement.

Starting with the open-air breakfast with NBK Automobiles team among Mercedes-Benz cars, the reporters who

represent dailies, magazines and online portals, along with social media influencers enjoyed a full and comprehensive golf training session under the supervision of professional trainers.

2019 marks the 29th Anniversary of the prestigious Mercedes Trophy Golf Tournament globally.

It is an exclusive series of invitational golf tournaments conducted over the world for Mercedes-Benz Owners.

Each year, over 60,000 players from more than 60 countries tee off at the Mercedes Trophy in local, regional and national events, competing to qualify for the Mercedes Trophy World Final at the home of the automobile; Stuttgart, Germany.

This venue underlines the close relations between the brand Mercedes-Benz and golf, and reflects the values of luxury and elegance that they represent. Nasser Bin Khaled Automobiles has built its success by establishing solid, longstanding relationships with its customers, and by offering a wide range of quality products.

MOTORSPORT

Basic beginnings to global exposure: F1 reaches 1,000 races

'Every year we find something new, we go quicker, that's Formula One'

AFP
Shanghai

From the first race at a converted World War II airbase in rural England to this weekend's 1,000th grand prix at the \$240 million international circuit in Shanghai, Formula One has come a long way since it all began in 1950. Silverstone held the first race 69 years ago and the British Grand Prix has remained, with the Italian GP, the only ever-present races on the calendar.

In 70 seasons, Formula One has visited 32 countries across five continents and a street circuit in Vietnam will be the newest addition next year.

Formula One's organisation was bought for \$8 billion in 2017 by US media giant Liberty Media and is now listed on Wall Street - a long way from the early days when tyre and oil companies supplied their products for free in return for having their logos on drivers' overalls.

Italian Giuseppe Farina was victorious in May 1950 and went on to clinch the world championship four months later in his home country. A season now lasts more than twice as long.

Michael Schumacher holds the record of seven drivers' world championships and there is a poignancy that his last race win came in Shanghai, in 2006.

Schumacher has not been seen in public since suffering life-threatening brain injuries in a skiing accident in 2013.

At the peak of his career, the German summed up the essence of the sport. "Every year we find something new, we go quicker, that's Formula One," he said.

One of Schumacher's former Ferrari teammates, the Brazilian Rubens Barrichello, holds the record for most race starts but failed to win a world title in his 18-year career.

Defending champion Lewis Hamilton is closing in on Schumacher's all-time mark after winning his fifth world title last year at the age of 34 to edge ahead of great rival Sebastian Vettel, who won four championships with Red Bull before moving to Ferrari. It was Argentine great Juan Manuel Fangio who dominated the opening decade with five world championships in seven seasons from 1951.

He was succeeded in the 1960s by multiple world champions Jack Brabham, Jim Clark, Graham Hill and Jackie Stewart.



In this file photo taken on July 16, 2017, winner Mercedes' British driver Lewis Hamilton is celebrated by fans after the British Formula One Grand Prix at the Silverstone motor racing circuit in Silverstone, central England. (AFP)

10 KEY MOMENTS

1950 First Formula One world championship race held at Silverstone in England. The Alfa Romeo team dominate with Italian Giuseppe Farina winning and going on to take the inaugural world title.

1963 Formula One gets serious about safety with fireproof suits made compulsory and cockpits restructured so drivers can evacuate quickly in the event of an accident.

1972 Briton Bernie Ecclestone buys the Brabham team and goes on to become the most influential figure in the history of the sport, reigning over it for more than four decades.

1976 Championship ends in a showdown between Ferrari's Niki Lauda and McLaren's James Hunt in a soaking wet Japan. Lauda, who had suffered life-threatening injuries

weeks earlier, decides it is too dangerous and pulls out, handing the title to Hunt. Their rivalry inspires the acclaimed film *Rush*.

1994 Sporting world is plunged into grief after triple world champion Ayrton Senna is killed aged 34 when his Williams crashes at the San Marino Grand Prix, to the horror of millions of television spectators round the globe.

1995 Racing great Juan Manuel Fangio dies aged 84. The Argentine, winner of five world championships in the 1950s, will be forever remembered as a pioneering legend inspiring generations of drivers.

2007 Formula One is rolled by a damaging "Spygate" scandal. Leading team McLaren are fined \$100 million and effectively thrown out of the constructors' championship for obtain-

ing confidential information from rivals Ferrari.

2008 The lights go on as F1 holds its first night race. Glitzy Singapore is the destination and the Marina Bay street grand prix in the heart of the Lion City quickly establishes itself as one of the circuit's most glamorous races.

2012 Michael Schumacher retires, aged 43, for the second and final time. The German departs the sport the most successful driver of all time, winning seven world titles. A year later he suffers a life-threatening brain injury in a skiing accident. He survives but has not been seen in public since.

2017 US-based Liberty Media takes control of F1 for just over \$8 billion, signalling the end of the reign of colourful ringmaster Ecclestone and a new chapter for the sport.

The 1970s featured the rivalry between James Hunt and Niki Lauda and the 1980s saw the emergence of the great Alain Prost and legendary Brazilian Ayrton Senna before Schumacher began his dominance in the mid-1990s. More than 20 drivers of the 772 who have started a Grand Prix have died behind the wheel, including Senna and Austrian Roland Ratzenberger on one dark weekend in 1994 at the San Marino Grand Prix. Their deaths led to wide-rang-

ing changes to improve safety which meant there were no further fatalities until Jules Bianchi died in 2015 from head injuries sustained at the 2014 Japanese Grand Prix - a tragedy which led to the development of the distinctive "halo" cockpit head protection system.

Ferrari are the only manufacturer to have competed in every campaign and the Italian outfit have won a record 16 titles since the constructors' championship was first introduced in 1958 as

the International Cup for Formula One Manufacturers. The first winners were British team Vanwall and Europeans have dominated with a trio of British manufacturers Williams (9 titles), McLaren (8) and Lotus (7) claiming 24 constructors' crowns between them.

Next on the all-time list come Germany's Mercedes with five while Austria's Red Bull enjoyed four golden years with Vettel leading them to a clean sweep from 2010 to 2013, but that is

mainly due to sweeping rule changes. Hamilton is now a five-time champion and could match Schumacher's seven during his Mercedes contract which runs until 2020. The Briton is among the favourites Sunday in Shanghai, but for Herrmann it is not the same sport anymore when the cars line up on the grid. "In the past it was very high risk and little fee.

Now it is very high fee and no risk," he says, not as an accusation but simply as a statement.

TENNIS

Granollers upsets fifth seed Fritz in Houston

Reuters
Houston

Former champion Marcel Granollers used the drop shot to good effect as he surprised fifth-seeded American Taylor Fritz in three sets at the US Men's Clay Court Championship in Houston on Monday.

The 32-year-old Spaniard claimed a 6-2, 4-6, 6-2 victory over Fritz, the only seeded player in first round action at the River Oaks Country Club.

"Taylor is a player who can hit very hard. He hits very hard from the baseline and I needed to change rhythm," said Granollers, who won the tournament in 2008.

"If I hit good drop shots, I think it's a good option against him and I think today it worked."

Granollers reeled off three consecutive games, including a break at 5-2, to claim the opening set. World number 58 Fritz bounced back in the second, surging ahead after Granollers had tied the set at 4-4.

The deciding set was all Granollers after Fritz, the 2018 semi-finalist, took the opening game. Granollers won five consecutive games before Fritz held at 5-2.

Earlier, Norway's Casper Ruud made his River Oaks debut by defeating Bolivian Hugo Dellien 7-6(7), 6-4.

His father, Christian, won the tournament in 1996 when it was a non-ATP Tour event.

Former champion Ivo Karlovic was not as fortunate as Ruud and the 40-year-old Croat, who won in 2007, fell to American Ryan Harrison 6-3, 6-4.

Kerber and Goerges return for German Fed Cup tie

Wimbledon champion Angelique Kerber and Julia Goerges return into Germany's Fed Cup team for a relegation/promotion Fed Cup tie next week in Latvia, the German Tennis Federation (DTB) said. World number five Kerber and 18th-ranked Goerges missed the first-round tie in February which the Germans lost 4-0 at home against Belarus. The two will lead a German team which also features Andera Petkovic and doubles specialist Anna-Lena Groenefeld for the April 19-20 tie on hard court in Riga. "I am very happy that Angie is available for this tie. She is a world class player and difficult to beat," captain Jens Gerlach said. He added in the direction Goerges: "She has often won deciding points in Fed Cup and is always a reinforcement." Latvia is yet to announce its team but it could feature 13th-ranked Anastasija Sevastova and former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko.

Australian Bernard Tomic and Chile's Christian Garin also advanced.

Tomic, firing 11 aces, outlasted American Denis Kudla 7-6(8), 7-5 and Garin came from a set down to top Uruguayan Pablo Cuevas 4-6, 6-4, 6-2. Top seeded American Steve Johnson is seeking to become the first player to win three consecutive titles in the tournament since Bobby Riggs did in 1936-38.

CYCLING

Alaphilippe wins dirt road Basque stage

AFP
Gorritz, Spain

On-form Frenchman Julian Alaphilippe burst to a hilltop win on stage 2 of the Tour of the Basque Country yesterday while overnight leader Maximilian Schachmann held on to the overall lead.

On a hilly stage which featured several dirt road sections a select group of around 40 formed even before going up the final short climb with a tricky eight percent gradient.

One man not in that group was Adam Yates, whose recent run of poor luck in finishing runner up twice in one-week tours, continued when the British climber lost 1min 10sec due to a puncture. "The final, with a climb like this, was perfect for me I knew that Michel

Kwiatkowski was strong, so I followed him," Alaphilippe explained after beating Bjorg Lambrecht and Sky's Kwiatkowski by a single second.

"I'm really happy to take another win," added the one day specialist who won the Milan-San Remo classic two weeks ago.

In another incident Alaphilippe said sorry after the race to Schachmann for clipping him in the final struggle for the stage win. Schachmann of the Bora-Hansgrohe team won the 11.2km opening day individual time trial and still holds an overall lead of five seconds on Alaphilippe.

OVERALL STANDINGS

1. Maximilian Schachmann (Ger-Bora) 03hrs 36mins 44sec, 2. Julian Alaphilippe (Fra-QS1) at 05sec, 3. Michal Kwiatkowski (Pol-Sky) 10.

ALL TO PLAY FOR

World's top 10 all seeking first green jacket

'I think it's just a coincidence that nobody in the top 10 has won the Masters'

AFP
Augusta, United States

There's a major hole on the career accomplishments list for the world's 10 top-ranked golfers this week at Augusta National — none of them owns a Masters champion's green jacket.

It's the first time since the global rankings began in 1986 that the entire top 10 arrived at the year's first major tournament and none of them had ever won the Masters, including new world number one Justin Rose of England.

"If you look at the skill sets of the guys at the top of the world rankings, Augusta really should suit most of us," Rose said. "So I would say that this year there's probably a very good probability that one of those guys will get it done." Third-ranked Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland, a four-time major winner, needs a Masters win to become only the sixth golfer to complete a career Grand Slam.

There's a trio of top-10 Americans with major wins lacking one at Augusta National, including second-ranked Dustin Johnson, three-time major winner Brooks Koepka (fourth) and 2017 PGA Championship winner Justin Thomas (fifth).

"I think it's just a coincidence that nobody in the top 10 has won the Masters," Thomas said. "It definitely speaks to the new wave of players."

Three more US players seek their first major title: Bryson DeChambeau (sixth), Rickie Fowler (ninth) and Xander Schauffele (10th).

Mix in reigning seventh-ranked reigning British Open champion Francesco Molinari of Italy and sixth-ranked Spaniard Jon Rahm, who shared fourth last year in only



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland and Dustin Johnson of the United States walk on the second hole during a practice round prior to The Masters at Augusta National Golf Club in Augusta, Georgia.

his second Masters start, and there's an element of extra hunger under the Georgia pines this week.

"The most important thing I learned last year is that Augusta National, expect for the pars, plays over par," Rahm said. "So if you make par, don't get frustrated. That's just the way it is around this course."

Rahm, 24, could not claw back from an opening 75 last year despite firing the lowest Masters third-round score of 65, but won the Spanish Open the following week.

"I hope my putting is a lot better than it was last year,"

Rahm said. "I feel strong in every part of my game. I just want to make a few more putts than I did last year."

The only golfer among the world's top 16 who has won the Masters is 14-time major winner Tiger Woods. And the 12th-ranked American, now 43, won his most recent of four Masters crowns in 2005.

Thunderstorms closed the course Monday afternoon with more severe weather forecast later, but most players in the field of 87 — matching the smallest since Woods won in 1997 — practised before the rain struck. Rose, the 2013 US

Open winner, uses his ranking to motivate not pressure, especially after winning as world number one at Torrey Pines in January.

"I use it as maybe a little inspiration, certainly not as an expectation," Rose said. "Clearly to win a major as number one would be even more fantastic."

"Confidence is up there for sure. I've had enough good golf to give me confidence and I've had enough poor golf to keep me working hard, which is sometimes a good place to be."

The only Masters wins for players who topped the rankings that week were by Ian Woosnam

in 1991, Fred Couples in 1992 and Tiger Woods in 2001 and 2002.

Players examined the revamped fifth hole, now a 495-yard par-4 test after the tee was moved back 40 yards.

"Number five is probably going to play the toughest hole now for sure," Rose said. "If you can get it through six holes even par, it's a great start."

"It's great," Woods said. "I love it. It's still between a 3-wood and a driver off the green," Thomas added. "The difference is having a longer club into the tee. That's going to be a tougher shot."

SPOTLIGHT

Many happy returns as No.1 Rose's caddie is back in action

AFP
Augusta

Justin Rose was excited to reclaim golf's world number one ranking on Monday but the most meaningful comeback for him this week at the Masters is by caddie Mark Fulcher.

Fulcher, Rose's regular caddie for more than a decade, will be back on the bag at Augusta National for the first time since undergoing heart surgery in mid-January.

Britain's Rose, the 2013 US Open winner and twice a Masters runner-up in the past four years, says "Fooch" could be just the edge he needs to become only the fourth man to win the green jacket while atop the rankings.

"He has been champing at the bit to get back," Rose said Monday. "Where Fooch is going to earn his money and earn his position on the team is on Saturday and Sunday."

"Basically when emotions start to get more intense and there's more variability from that point of view, that's when I'm going to rely on him more and more."

While Fulcher was off having his mitral valve repaired to allow blood flow between chambers of the heart, Rose was aided by Fulcher's pal Gareth Lord, who had caddied for Sweden's Henrik Stenson. Lord was bagman for Rose's win in January at Torrey Pines.

Fulcher made an informal return two weeks ago at the WGC Match Play Championship, carrying bags for two practice rounds and walking with Rose during the competition, handling the comeback emotions before getting down to the business of winning a Masters.

"When the going gets tough, that's when I think someone who knows you so well — and we have so many positive experiences out there under pressure that we can



draw on together — that's where Fooch is going to come into his own for me," Rose said.

Fulcher has stayed in close contact with Rose and Lord, who fulfilled the one task Fulcher requested.

"Fooch said to Lordy, 'You've got one job, just give him back to me as world number one,'" Rose said. "The fact that the ranking switched this week was kind of a nice touch."

It's not necessarily a good omen for Rose. The only Masters winners who were atop the rankings, which began in 1986, were Welshman Ian Woosnam in 1991, American Fred Couples in 1992 and US star Tiger Woods in 2001 and 2002.

Rose, the 2016 Rio Olympic champion, says his margin atop the rankings is so slight that he won't take on the 17-year drought of number ones, dragging in past top-spot holders like Rory McIlroy, Dustin Johnson and Brooks Koepka.

"No one is really being that dominant right now," Rose said. "I think if anyone's been dominant, it has been Rory in the last sort of couple of months. Hence, the ranking between Brooks, myself, Dustin, even going back to Justin Thomas, it has bounced around a lot."

FOCUS

DeChambeau digging for insight at Augusta National

AFP
Augusta

Golf's "mad scientist" Bryson DeChambeau is taking Augusta National Golf Club's more traditional approach in stride as he prepares for the 83rd Masters.

"I would say that this week is unique with the history, the golf that's been played out here, the rules that are out here are a little different than each and every week," DeChambeau said. "My dedication to figuring things out is the exact same."

DeChambeau, like all in the Masters field, has to make do without green contour books available at US PGA Tour events.

Augusta does not allow devices to gauge distance or slope during practice rounds.

"I prepare as much as I possibly can with what's allowed here," DeChambeau said. "I have to work harder to get some insight than at other places, but that's fine."

"That's a part of the process, and I think the person who digs it out of the dirt the most should have a little bit of an advantage."

DeChambeau, 25, will be teeing it up at the Masters for the third time — and just the second as a pro.

He was an amateur in 2016, when he was coming off a 2015 collegiate campaign that saw him win both the US Amateur and NCAA collegiate title in the same year.

"I'd say the coolest part of that experience was being able to step up on that tee (in) 2016 with everyone thinking I'm pretty darned nervous and I get up there and I just smiled because I was prepared," he said.

"I had played over a dozen rounds here in 2016 and was really, I thought, ready to win the tournament."

"I had a chance to win it and I knew I did and after 35 holes I was right there," recalled De-



Chambeau, who was three-under par and in second place coming to the 18th hole on Friday — when he pulled his drive into a holly bush.

"Unfortunately, that holly bush, the 36th hole of the tournament kind of cost me a little bit," said DeChambeau, who returned to the tee and promptly pulled another drive.

"But other than that it was a fantastic ride and being the low amateur champion was fantastic."

Certainly the world number six will be looking for more this week. Since finishing tied for 38th in his return to Augusta last year, DeChambeau has won five times.

That includes his first international victory at the Dubai Desert Classic in January — where he won by a record seven strokes.

Two of the last three winners of the Dubai event — Danny Willett in 2016 and Sergio Garcia in 2017 — went on to win the Masters in the same year.

The mathematically minded DeChambeau said he couldn't really make that add up to a prediction.

"I think a lot of it's coincidence," he said, "but definitely makes me feel good."

CONFIDENT

Fowler 'more ready' than ever

Reuters
Augusta

Rickie Fowler returned to Augusta National on Monday with the heartbreak of last year's runner-up Masters finish firmly behind him and brimming with confidence that a breakthrough major win is closer than ever. Fowler, a five-times winner on the PGA Tour, has three runner-up finishes to show from 36 major appearances and as a result finds his name on the list of the best players who have never won one of golf's four blue riband events.



But such talk does not discourage the 30-year-old American, who comes into the year's first major in solid form and among the favourites to claim a Green Jacket. "Compared to four, five, whatever years ago, yeah, I'm more ready than I've ever been," Fowler told reporters. "Not saying that I can sit up here and tell you I'm definitely going to go win, but I like my chances."

"I love this place. I know I can play well around here. For me, every time I get to play it, it's fun... I get to use my imagination around here."

Last year Fowler started the final round at Augusta National five shots behind overnight leader Patrick Reed but a spar-

ling back nine, which included a birdie at the last, saw him card a five-under-par 67. The strong finish was not enough as Reed managed to hang on for a one-stroke victory but Fowler, after getting over the pain of another near miss, was able to take plenty of positives from his performance.

"The way I executed on the back nine Sunday last year was definitely something I pull from, and it was a lot of fun to be in the mix, birdieing 18, to make Patrick earn it a bit," said Fowler.

"But I was just a little bit too far back, and Patrick put together a strong week of golf. So it was fun. It was great to be in the mix, and like I said, have a chance. But time to do one better."

BOTTOMLINE

Mexicans serve up Latin flair

Reuters
Augusta

The Mexican flag has been waving proudly at Augusta National with amateur Alvaro Ortiz taking the baton from Maria Fassi and carrying it into this week's Masters with his eyes on a Green Jacket.

After a four-decade absence, Augusta National is getting a fresh taste of Latin flair served up by a new generation of Mexican golfers primed to battle for titles.

Fassi provided Ortiz with a tough act to follow by finishing runner-up to Jennifer Kupcho in the inaugural Augusta National Women's Amateur after a stir-

ring back-nine battle with the American on Saturday.

Now Ortiz steps into the spotlight as he becomes the first player from his country since Victor Regalado in 1979 to play at the Masters and only the second Mexican amateur following Juan Antonio Estrada who featured at Augusta from 1962-64.

The determined Ortiz finished runner-up in the two previous Latin America Amateur Championship tournaments before this year claiming the title and his Masters invite at the third attempt.

"It was a huge deal for my family and me for sure and the whole country," said Ortiz, who will turn professional immediately after the Masters. "When I came back to Mexico after winning, it was all cheers and people were so happy."

"People were so proud that I was going to be able to put a Mexican flag up there."

Ortiz said he had received plenty of advice ahead of tomorrow's opening round with most people telling him to relax and enjoy the experience.

But the 23-year-old, showing no fear and more than a little cockiness, said he would be trying to win a Green Jacket like everyone else, although admitting if given a chance to sign for a top 10 right now he would take it.

"In my mind, I'm out here to compete and I want the Green Jacket," he said. "I think every player is thinking like that."

"Of course, winning the low amateur would be nice," he said referring to the Silver Cup awarded to the lowest amateur to make the cut.

"Making the cut would be a really good finish too but if you give me a top 10 right now, I'll sign it for sure."

While a top 10 finish would guarantee a Masters invite next year, Ortiz is soaking up every moment of his experience now.

He spent Monday night in the Crow's Nest above the Augusta National clubhouse, where amateurs have traditionally slept, and promised to bite into the local delicacy — a pimento cheese sandwich — at some point.

"Yeah, everybody was talking about that," Ortiz said with a smile. "Actually, I received more arguments about the... chicken barbecue sandwich, which I think is pretty good. I already tried that one, but I'll have to try the pimento cheese."